

Creating a Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone in the Middle East

Statement of Pax Christi International

Pax Christi International strongly supports the creation of a Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone in the Middle East as a significant contribution to a nuclear weapons free world. To this end, Pax Christi International urges all stakeholders to encourage negotiations towards a binding international treaty that would abolish such weapons definitively.

In May 2012, Ambassador Laajava of Finland, the coordinator of the December 2012 conference examining steps towards a Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone in the Middle East submitted a progress report at the NPT PrepCom. It reported that a number of issues are still outstanding, including the level and composition of participants to be involved and, crucially, the participation of Iran, Israel, Pakistan and India.

This December conference is of the utmost importance, to demonstrate progress on the 2010 NPT action plan, to fulfil the original agreement made in 1995 to continue indefinitely the NPT agreement, and to meet the desire, first expressed by Egypt and Iran in the UN General Assembly in 1974 for a Middle East Nuclear Weapons Free Zone. Article 5 of the 2010 NPT Review Conference Action Plan urges nuclear weapons-states to “commit to accelerate concrete progress on the steps leading to nuclear disarmament,” an important and ambitious goal in a region which is thought to host covert nuclear arsenals and facilities.

Over the past two years, numerous civil society events and activities have taken place in support of a process that should ultimately lead to establishing a Middle East free of weapons of mass destruction. Comprehensive sets of recommendations were developed by international civil society projects such as Horizon 2012,¹ and by activities throughout the region, such as the Israeli “According to Foreign Sources” campaign.

Expectation management is important, and a clear definition of success is a key part of that. Most civil society organisations agree that the participation in the December meeting of all states in the region would constitute success. Countries outside the region can use their existing relationships to encourage Iran, Israel and all Arab states in the Middle East to participate in good faith. Those inside the Middle East region could declare their willingness to sign onto the chemical or biological weapons conventions, indicate a willingness to sign the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, and commit to attend the conference with an open mind.

Expectation management is also the recognition that the December conference is only the beginning of the process. It will clearly not be a negotiating conference. A success would be if the conference opens the opportunity for participants to talk about future negotiations. It would be advisable and encouraging for the participants, if this process would clearly run parallel with one focused on normalisation and peace building. The December conference, if attended by all states in the region, is a confidence building measure (CBM) in itself that may lower tensions in the region and pave the way for future progress.

¹ <http://www.peaceboat.org/english/?page=view&nr=110&type=28&menu=105>

The agenda for Helsinki 2012 should be clear, achievable, and not overly ambitious. It should not set a timetable for reduction and disarmament. Instead, the conference should aim to establish CBMs such as the notification of military manoeuvres and missile test launches, and a re-targeting of test and deployed missiles to the sea. As Sharon Dolev of the Israeli Disarmament Movement wrote “The Helsinki 2012 conference should build special mechanisms to oversee the process of confidence-building and supply the United Nations with feedback about its progress. These mechanisms will contribute to the continuity of CBMs as a process and make sure that what happens in Helsinki will not stay in Helsinki.”

Pax Christi International urges religious leaders, governments and civil society organisations around the world to make clear our collective, urgent responsibility to rid the world of nuclear weapons generally, and particularly in the volatile Middle East.

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